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VICISSITUDES OF THE DRAMA.

AFTER a period of learned indifference and ignorant abuse, and owing to causes flattering alike to the honesty and impartiality of modern opinion, and honorable to the actors themselves, a new kind of attention is being directed towards the theatre. The night of Puritanism is giving way before a dawn of enlightened freedom, and in this awakening the Drama is not a sluggard. The old pleas for the "defense" of the stage are well nigh abandoned. An earnest and loving inquiry is being made by scholars and sincere moralists to learn whether it is not possible to make the Drama an art in harmony with the other forces for man's improvement which illustrate our century's progress.

That the Drama is an evidence of civilization is no longer questioned. In all times, whenever men have gone into communities, putting on the garb of peace and uniting in families and homes, the theatre has formed a part of the public plan, evidencing the romance, the heroism, the poetry, the conquests, or the decline of those communities. Schlegel declares that a high and flourishing theatre testifies to the culture of the nation which fosters it. A slight examination of Greek and Roman history will prove the truth of this. In the palmy days of the Athenian, when his city was the arbiter of taste, the home of painting, sculpture, poetry, and history, the dramatist and the actor were united in the most perfect sense with the masters of these sister arts for the adornment of Athenian culture. In the decline of the Roman Empire, the early church, in endeavoring to expurgate all Pagan literature, outlawed the theatre. The Drama shared in the general debasement of morals during the reigns of the emperors. In the Middle or Dark Ages no public theatres existed. The old Pagan and Greek dramatic literature had fallen into alien hands in the East, and into the close clutches of the church in the West. All cultivation and learning were held by

the hierarchy, and within this exclusive circle the Drama was preserved in the house of its enemies, until the revival of learning and the enlargement of man's freedom in the Renaissance. Then, as if refreshed by a long sleep, the Drama sprang into new life and being, and under the enlightened patronage of the Medici divided with Angelo and Raphael the attention of the learned. The barbarous Turk, casting out the descendants of Pericles and Plato from the houses of their fathers, banished also the remnants of a literature which had, in part, survived the long night of superstition, barbarous wars, and alien beliefs. In the flood of glory thus deluging the Italian republics, the fragments of the Grecian drama came to bear their testimony to the civilization of their era, and to share the glory of the greatest sculptors and painters of antiquity. As orator and actor the name of Æschines emerged to claim a part in the new allotment of honors, side by side with the philosophers, historians, and dramatists of his native land.

From this point onward to the days of the early English drama, the ascent is gradual, but certain. The debt which Shakespeare and his brother dramatists owed to the Italian renaissance of the Drama can be found in the plots of nearly all the great tragedians, and the vivid southern coloring of much of the dialogue of the Elizabethan writings. Historians assume that the glory of the Elizabethan period eclipsed all that preceded it. The Wars of the Roses and the struggles which involved the whole nation in the ways of strife were succeeded by an era of peace and good will through the marriage of Henry VII. with Elizabeth. During the succeeding reign of Henry VIII., through the liberality of the learning-loving Wolsey, under a régime of material prosperity and freedom from war, the way was cleared for the advent of those literary giants, who sang the glories of their native land in an improved language, and imaged the progress of England's prosperity in celebration of the deeds which had placed her upon her proud eminence. In all the paths of learning and of thought a revival had taken place. While Shakespeare carried on the traditions of the Drama beyond the wildest dreams of the early Greek writers, Bacon was giving to mankind a scheme of philosophy as perfect as that of which Plato only dreamed. Again was seen the intimate union between the great co-workers in art and literature

which had subsisted in the best days of Athens. Shakespeare, the worthy successor to the inheritance of both Æschylus and Æschines, communed with Raleigh, Essex, Bacon, Burleigh, and his Queen, as the Greek had done with Pericles and Phidias. What Marlowe had outlined as the possibilities of our language in versification the genius of Shakespeare perfected and made enduring. Upon the boards of an insignificant inn yard the English dramatist offered with simple adjuncts the fruits of his imagination. A race of actors was soon created worthy to represent and embody the glorious conceptions, and Richard Burbage, the original of so many of Shakespeare's great characters, the companion, partner, and friend of the greatest of living or dead writers, was worthy to sit by the side and share in the triumphs of his most illustrious master. Uninterrupted by sinister events, and suffered to flow on unchecked, it is impossible to predict the result of that movement which had made of all language poetry, and of all people critics. But the dark cloud of Puritanism which had hovered over the last days of Elizabeth's reign, ominously full of baleful promise, burst at last, and overwhelmed at once literature, art, and science. As the early church had at her advent outlawed the theatre, so the victorious Puritan trampled and destroyed the work but lately so prosperous. There was this difference, however, in the two events. In the case of the Roman, a love of learning and a reverence for the past had treasured in selfish secrecy the possessions of the outlawed, so that when the dawn came they were easily reclaimed. In the other total annihilation was the plan. The despised actor, who had mimicked the false face of the hypocrite and held him up to scorn in the theatre, was denied even the rights of citizenship. Before the great works of the Elizabethan dramatists had been secured to posterity in perfected editions, the hand of the iconoclast had thrown down the press and scattered the leaves into the air. Under the sway of the Puritans, the scholar and the artist found no place. Passion and imagination took on the form of fanaticism in religion and austerity in literature.

Blind Milton, whose soul dwelt in the divine companionship, knew too little of man's needs and pleasures to have championed the fallen stage. He only comes to us out of that time to prove that the love of learning had not expired. No poet, save sad Cowley,

the least inspired of singers, found utterance in that night of worse than Cimmerian darkness. One sign, and one only, and that least in keeping with the tyranny of Puritanism over the realms of thought, emerged like a bow of promise to the suffering arts. Liberty of the press, freedom of utterance, began to make way despite even the suspicious guard of the watchful Puritan. Thus the element which has always aided the utterance of the philosopher, guided the instinct of the patriot, and winged the thought of the poet—perfect freedom—was born in the last death agonies of the commonwealth. With the dishonored bones of the dead Protector were scattered all the Dead Sea fruits of his reign. Hypocrisy laid aside her tiresome mask and joined in the general license which came in with the restoration. The Drama and her traditions had been deserted for well nigh thirty years, the calling had been pursued under a ban, secretly and furtively, an act of Parliament made the actor a vagrant, and when the day of restoration came, the stage bore its part in the general jubilee. An era of such wild and unparalleled infamy succeeded as would have made Tiberius blush. A shameless court, a debauched nobility, a contemptible theatre, shared the infamy of public approbation. Much of the literature of Charles is absolutely too loathsome for examination. Unrestrained by any check from the past, uninstructed by any of the old traditions, a new stage and a new drama were created from which the esteem of all good men was withdrawn as from a leprous thing. This is what Puritan watchfulness and tyranny in morals had bequeathed to the last days of the seventeenth century.

With the downfall of the House of Stuart, and the decorous reign of William, the stage speedily showed signs of a healthy revival. Again, as in former times, she united with the writers, the scholars, and the men of taste in Anne's glorious reign in upholding what was noble and pure. The comparison between the theatre of Charles and that of the closing year of Anne will be found highly creditable to the dramatist and the actor. Still suffering under the stigma which the Puritan had affixed to his calling, the actor did not despair of the future. The life of Betterton is worthy to be compared with that of any gentleman of his age, while his genius shed undying lustre on his calling. With the coming of Garrick and the direction which his genius gave to the stage a new era begins.

A great actor, a great scholar, a skillful manager, a poet of no mean ability, he brought back to the theatre the works of the earlier dramatists. He created a school of acting of which our modern style is only the amplification. As a critic he edited many works which would have otherwise been rejected. As a poet and dramatist he wrote many of our best comedies and plays, while as a gentleman he carried into the drawing-room of princes the bearing which won not only respect for himself, but honor for his calling. In less than a century from the day of Cromwell's accession to the advent of Garrick, a seeming total annihilation of the Drama has been succeeded by as baleful a revival, and at last by a triumphant purification. The stage had in turn reflected the license of the restoration, the decorum of the court of Anne, and the splendor of the age of Johnson.

The liberal form which thought has been gradually assuming during the past two centuries has cleared the path to a better feeling for the theatre as an institution, arising out of man's necessity for entertainment. Much of the crudity which belongs to the representations in the time of Garrick had been softened and refined under the sway of the Kembles, while it remained for William Macready to lead the stage up to the high plane of excellence at which we now find it. From the many vicissitudes to which the theatre has been subjected, it will be seen that without organization within her ranks, without cohesive brotherhood in one allotted path, she has emerged on all occasions, not only uninjured, but absolutely fresher and stronger than before. Her many trials may not have entirely purified her, but they seem not to have impaired her vigor. Undaunted by the attacks of the Puritans, undismayed by the ostracism to which bigotry and ignorance have often condemned her children, she displayed at all times a vitality and a persistency which only grew stronger by repression. In all other branches of art and literature a guild feeling had inspired the timid in their dark hour with hope for the future. The Drama had boasted no such bond of union between its fellows. Within the theatre the actors had only such a community of interest as might be broken by selfishness or dissolved by caprice; without, their fellowship bore only the impress of mutual inclination. Under no condition of prosperity or adversity had the actors of England, up to the era of Macready, debated any plan by which their art could be benefited by union, their own places assured by

a permanent organization. With high hope always for their beloved art, with trusting confidence that such a future would come to her, they yet saw no way by which they could advance the work. The theatre, as an organized body, had never looked abroad for help. It had depended upon general patronage for its support. The liberality of Northumberland might relieve the embarrassments of John Kemble as a personal act of favor to his friend, but the general welfare of the arts, the grouping together of the diversified interests of the stage, were not thought of. In spite of this want of union, the English theatre has shown some of the best elements of the sturdy Saxon character. While each age has been conspicuous for the individual prominence of some great actor, the general excellence which would result from an organized and acknowledged school has been in some measure sacrificed. In France, where the theatre has been for a long period the especial care of the whole nation, an *esprit de corps* has grown up, elevating the standard of acting and of criticism under this rule. The genius of Le Kain, of Talma, of Mars, and of Rachel is not so far exalted above the general plane as to be phenomenal. The ground is so fruitful of average harvests that expectancy eclipses wonder. Under the fostering care of the nation which subsidizes and sustains the Drama as a living illustration of the manners of the time, the actors, great and small, pay to their art mother an affectionate and constant devotion, sacrificing at all times personal interest and personal pride to the welfare of the whole.

The Theatre Français, the grown-up child of Molière, dating back to the days of the Grand Monarque, represents approved and worthy aristocracy. The actors are the elected chiefs in one of the greatest of the arts, their fitness their only claim to their station, their presence there an assurance of merit. In England no such plan is possible, none such will ever exist. Subvention dates from the days of patriarchal government, when the ruler was not only lord of the bodies, but of the taste and habits of his people. Under the more democratic form of England's laws all the arts are nourished only by the inclinations of the people unswayed by royal prejudice, unguided by regulated forms. A system by which the best fruits of the French conservatory might be gained, unsupported by government, is within the possibilities of the English drama, and to some such plan the actors of to-day

are looking hopefully, and even seeking the way by which to accomplish their purpose.

While we shall watch with interest this movement abroad, we may be sure that we have no cause to be idle here. In our own land the glories of the English stage have been reflected with undiminished lustre. The seeds which were blown by the breath of the Puritan from the green fields of England were wafted to our shores to germinate in a congenial soil. Against the stage in the early days of our national life, the old prejudices were arrayed as strongly as ever; the jealous Puritan had not forgotten the narrow school within which he had been nurtured and he frowned upon the theatre as darkly as ever his ancestors had done. But with the general awakening of liberal thought the Drama became emancipated from the bondage it had suffered, and after a career of hardly a century the stage of America ranks with its older and more experienced sisters in the old world. Sprung from the same sources, we have inherited the same methods, we live under the same laws as the English theatres have followed, but conservatism no longer cramps our energies or limits our endeavors. We have led the van of improvement in our model theatres. We have drawn alike from the English and Continental literature in our plays. We have created an American style of acting. But with our rapid growth, with the great demand for material which has sprung out of our increasing population, the necessity for organization has become more and more pressing. While the *personnel* of the theatre threatens to decline in character under the strain of demand and the absence of organization, with the enormous resources at the disposal of the American drama, it will be strange if some plan cannot be formed which shall not only succeed in meeting the increasing demand for actors, but will also raise the standard of merit. All the signs of the times point towards a higher office for the theatre, and a large usefulness.

Divines and scholars hopefully regard the future of the theatre as a grand helpmate in the education and culture of the nation. A willing hand will be given to any scheme which promises to give us an improved theatre, to elevate the standard of the art. The munificent support given by the people of England to Henry Irving, the loving estimation in which our own Edwin Booth is held by our own people, the sympathy which the public seems eager to extend to any of those who carry their ermine un-

stained, are indications of the popular feeling. It is the duty of the actor to meet this feeling at least half way, to give his hearty aid in any movement which looks to the improvement of the theatre, and by his own life to echo the good thoughts which are born of hope in the general heart. Many schemes suggest themselves, but the length of this article prevents their mention here. The simplest plan will be the best, the plan which leavens our ranks from below. We must, by a caution in the admission of unfit or unworthy members to the novitiate, create an *esprit de corps* which will be jealous of the purity of the whole order and cause each actor, high or low, to share the artist feeling. We can thus lay a foundation deep and broad, by which we shall not only preserve what is good of our traditions, but render it impossible for future evil to creep in. All true lovers of art will aid us, a liberal public will gladly sustain us, and we shall have shown the lovers of the theatre that we are not indifferent or careless where the interests of the Drama are concerned.

LAWRENCE BARRETT.